Cultural studies

USES OF THE THRONE HALL IN THE FORMER ROYAL PALACE IN BUCHAREST FROM 1947 TO 2019: A SOCIAL SEMIOTIC PERSPECTIVE

Marina-Cristiana ROTARU
Technical University of Civil Engineering Bucharest, Romania

e-mail: marina.rotaru77@gmail.com

Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is to investigate, from a socio-semiotic perspective, the manner in which the political regimes installed after the forced abdication of King Mihai I (on 30 December 1947) used the Throne Hall in the former royal palace in Bucharest to meet their own needs. In December 1947, Romania was illegally turned from a constitutional monarchy into a popular republic, with the help of the Red Army. Then, the popular republic was transformed into a socialist republic, in fact, a communist dictatorship. In December 1989, the communist regime collapsed and was replaced by a post-communist one, a regime which did not seem willing to leave behind the communist ideological legacy, manifest, in the 1990s, in the brutal repression of anti-government protesters in University Square in Bucharest, or in the Romanian Mineriads of 1990 and 1991. The political regimes that succeeded to power after 1947 deprived the Throne Hall of its monarchic symbolism and used it in ways incongruent with its inherent function, albeit for official purposes. The manner in which the communist regime made use of this particular place is indicative of its intent and success in reinventing traditions or adapting older traditions to its ideological goals, in order to alienate Romanians from their recent past, in disrespect for the nation's heritage. Although the former royal palace was completely transformed into a national museum of art after 1990, a cultural institution meant, by its very purpose, to save at least part of the nation's memory, political decision makers ignored the symbolism of a national museum such as the National Museum of Art of Romania, known to many Romanians as the former royal palace. In bewildering, yet not unprecedented fashion, the Throne Hall has been recently used, by the Romanian government, as a dining hall in a series of events that preceded the takeover of the presidency of the EU Council by Romania in January 2019. We claim that the government's decision can be circumscribed to Jean Baudrillard's concept of consumerism, characterized by the rule of sign value as a status symbol. In addition, Jan Blommaert's and Barbara Johnstone's taxonomies further the argument that the Throne Hall is not a mere space, but a place, its function having been perverted by both ideological manipulation and aggressive consumerism.*
Keywords: space; place; story; consumerism; Throne Hall;

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Introduction

By definition, a throne hall is a particular area in a royal residence used for State occasions in a country whose form of State is constitutional monarchy. In countries that are no longer constitutional monarchies, but have managed to preserve former royal residences as part of their built heritage, throne halls are usually transformed into places of memory, usually parts of museums. Today, museums are no longer just institutions that collect and preserve artifacts, they can play a paramount role in shaping the identity of a community by keeping the *story* of the place alive. The *story*, told time and time again, connects generations and helps build both community cohesion and cohesion across generations. Through the *story*, the past is no longer something far away, lost in the mists of time, but something still palpable that can be made known, understood and appropriated. However, what happens if the *story* of the place is more or less obliquely undermined by irreverent attitudes towards a nation's past?

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the manner in which the Throne Hall in the former royal palace in Bucharest has been used by State representatives for various purposes from 1947 to 2019, a span of time in which the country was abruptly transformed from a constitutional monarchy into a communist republic, and then a post-communist republic which later acceded to the European Union. Furthermore, the investigation tries to shed light on various interpretations attached to this particular place and on their change from one political regime to another. The year 1947 is the year that King Mihai I was illegally dethroned by the Soviet-supported communists and the monarchic constitutional regime was removed from power under Soviet pressure, the country being illegally proclaimed a popular republic without the people's consent. The year 2019 is the year that Romania celebrated thirty years since the fall of the communist regime and also the year it took over, for the first time since its accession to the European Union, the rotating presidency of the EU Council.

Immediately after the abdication of King Mihai I, monarchic symbols were removed from public places, including the Throne Hall, in an effort to erase the monarchic past of the country from people's collective memory. During the communist regime, the Throne Hall, deprived of its royal symbols, was given new names and was used for various official events: receptions of State leaders and other official guests, official conferences such as the reunion of the leaders of the Warsaw Pact, award ceremonies for various members of the Romanian Communist Party. In spite of this abusive appropriation of the Throne Hall by the communist regime, which will be explained in detail hereafter, the communist leaders of the country preserved

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the ceremonial function of the hall. During the anti-communist revolution of 1989, the entire building was severely damaged, having been attacked with projectiles and burned. The former Throne Hall was almost completely destroyed.

After 1990, the former royal palace, partly transformed under the communist regime into the National Museum of Art of Romania, underwent renovation and refurbishment works. Within the new capitalist economic system which Romania committed to, and according to the logic of commodification, the Throne Hall was turned into a moneymaking machine and came to be used in ways which not even the communists had dared to think of: as a wedding venue, a site for corporate parties, luxury product launches and fashion shows. Then, in November 2018, the Romanian government turned the Throne Hall into a dining hall, hosting a series of working lunches on the occasion of the visit of a delegation of the European Parliament, prior to Romania's taking over the presidency of the EU Council. The government's decision was received with massive disapproval by the general public, and the central press severely criticized the government's decision.

The radical change in the function of the Throne Hall, triggered by the brash consumerist ethos of Romanian society after 1990, can be investigated by applying Jean Baudrillard's concept of sign value to the attitude of various individuals who rented the hall for diverse purposes. Incapable of or unwilling to understand the symbolism of the Throne Hall in the life of the country, but somehow aware of the value of the hall (a place in a former royal palace), those consumers were mainly attracted by the prestige of the place, which they used as a status symbol. For the newly rich, the Throne Hall endowed their event with the panache they sought. The reduction of the Throne Hall to a commodity has also been made possible by the fact that many Romanians, educated during the communist regime, had been alienated from the monarchic past of their country, oblivious to the story, to use Barbara Johnstone's taxonomy (Johnstone, 1990: 90), to which the royal palace and the Throne Hall are circumscribed. Jan Blommaert, drawing on Barbara Johnstone, helps illustrate that for these people, the Throne Hall is just a *space*, a mere location whose remarkable story they are unaware of, not a *place*. *Space*, if endowed with "social, cultural, epistemic and affective attributes" can become *place* – "a particular space on which senses of belonging, property rights and authority can be projected" (Blommaert, 2005: 222).

The *story* of a place, which plays a role in shaping one's identity, tallies with Winston Churchill's motto: "we shape our buildings and afterwards they shape us" (Architecture of the Palace n.d.). The motto expresses Churchill's position towards the reconstruction of the Commons Chamber after it had

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been destroyed by bombs during the Blitz. The British Prime Minister advocated the traditional "adversarial rectangular pattern" of the Chamber, "a confrontational design [that] helps to keep debates lively and robust, but also intimate" and opposed the newly proposed "semi-circular or horse-shoe design". He stressed the fact that the traditional pattern of the Commons Chamber "was responsible for the two-party system which is the essence of British parliamentary democracy" (Architecture of the Palace n.d.). The values, beliefs and aspirations that people hold are embodied in the buildings they erect, and they later come to shape people's relationship with the place, making it part of their *story*, of who they are.

The Throne Hall during the Reigns of the Romanian Kings (1881-1947)

The old Throne Hall, still used in 1881 when the country became a kingdom, was initially furnished in the ornate Napoleon III style (Badea-Păun, 2017: 16) – probably a political statement indicating both Prince Carol of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen's[1] acknowledgment of Emperor Napoleon III's support for his candidacy for the Romanian throne and the prince's commitment to gear Romania's policy towards the West of Europe where, at that time, this particular style (manifest mainly in architecture, urbanism and interior design) was seen as a mark of modernity and progress.

After 1881, the year that Prince Carol was crowned, thus becoming King Carol I, the monarch decided to rebuild the old royal palace in Bucharest in order to make the edifice reflect the new political status of Romania – a country that had freed itself from the Ottoman suzerainty and had started the process of Westernization on its path towards modernization. The entire royal palace and the Throne Hall were refurbished in order to mirror the Principalities' transformation into an independent kingdom. In fact, the modernization of the country, which had started before the arrival of Prince Carol in the Romanian Principalities, was further marked by the adoption of Romania's first constitution, the Constitution of 1866, fashioned after the Belgian Constitution of 1831, an illustration of Romania's integration into modern Europe, whose values the country started to commit to. This new European identity embraced by Romania would soon be reflected in architecture and the arts, recognized as "instruments and vehicles

[1] Prince Carol of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen was elected Prince of the Romanian Principalities of Wallachia and Moldova in 1866, with the political backing of the French Emperor, Napoleon III, with whom the prince's family was related. Carol bore the title "Prince" from 1866 until 1881, when he was crowned king (after having won the independence of the Romanian Principalities from the Ottoman Porte in 1877-1878, on the battlefield).

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of a certain identity, bringing together the past ages and the present one"[2] (28). The modernized royal palace and the Throne Hall and, on a larger scale, the new architectural development of the Romanian capital illustrate how the country made its way through history, freeing itself from Ottoman rule and gaining its independence, turning into a modern European constitutional monarchy.

After the proclamation of the Romanian kingdom in 1881, the Throne Hall was refurbished and received two new thrones (which replaced the old ones used by Prince Alexandru Ioan Cuza and his wife, Princess Elena). The new thrones, which were used between 1885 and 1947, were made of gilded wood and had a neo-Byzantine design, which symbolically illustrated both the cultural heritage and the modern Romanian ethos. They were situated on a dais, and behind them, hanging on an arcade with the coat of arms of the kingdom, a purple velvet curtain with the two royal cyphers embroidered in gold thread hung. Above these, there was a canopy made of scarlet velvet, also embroidered in gold thread and adorned with gold tassels (38, 43).

In 1926, during the reign of King Ferdinand I, King Carol I's successor, the royal palace was seriously damaged by fire. The Throne Hall made no exception. Reconstruction works began the following year and were continued into the 1930s by King Ferdinand I's son, King Carol II, who got deeply involved in the reconstruction of the palace, which was redesigned and redecorated in the monumental style that it still bears today. The two thrones inherited from King Carol I had been saved, and one of them was placed on a dais, under a new crowned canopy which was supported by four columns with capitals decorated with eagles. On either side of the throne, there were two columns with a winged Victory on top, holding crowns of laurels in her hands. Behind the throne there was a scarlet curtain with the heraldic insignia of the old Medieval Romanian provinces and their voivodes, and the coat of arms of the House of Hohenzollern, all embroidered in gold thread. The entire structure was placed under a semi-dome, the basis of which was decorated with a frieze with the same armorial bearings of the Romanian provinces and their princes. On the ceiling, in front of the semi-dome, there was a fresco painted by Cecilia Cuţescu-Storck, entitled *The Apotheosis of the Arts and Sciences under King Carol II* (98-99) – a tribute to the king for his major contribution to the development of the arts and sciences during his reign.

[2] My translation (instrumente şi vehicule ale unei anumite identităţi, reunind epocile trecute cu cea prezentă.)

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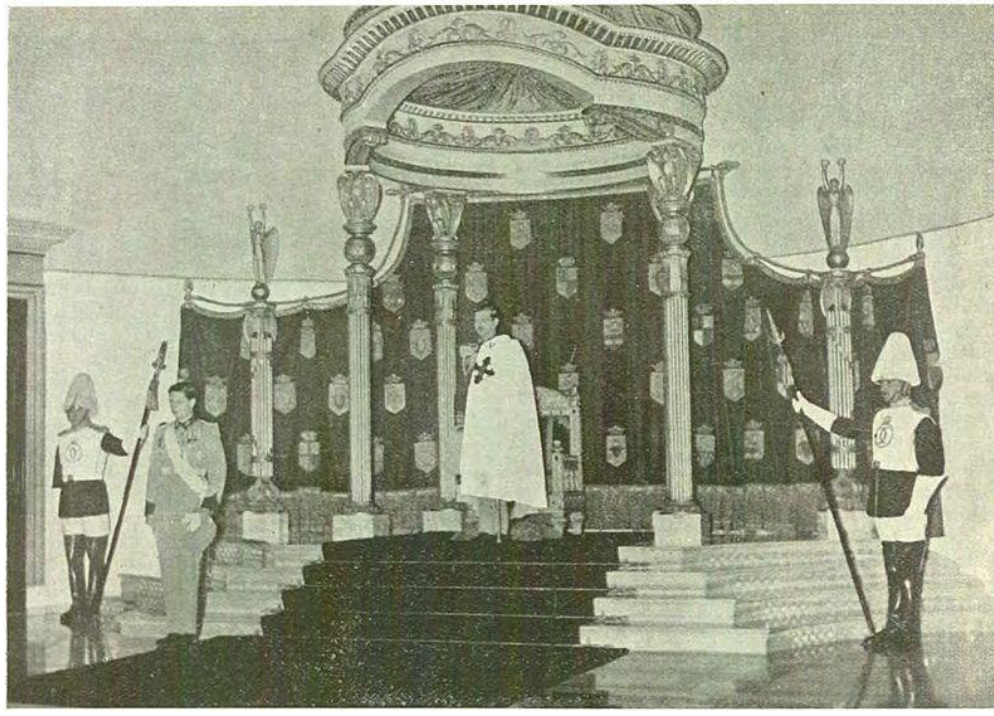


Figure 1. The apse with the royal throne and the canopy in the Throne Hall, after the 1937 renovations. King Carol II stands in front of the throne, and Crown Prince Mihai is at the basis of the stairs. Source: The Encyclopedia of Romania, 1938, volume 1, page 1080.

Throughtout the reigns of the four Romanian kings and in spite of various works of reconstruction and refurbishment, three essential elements of the Throne Hall, each with its own distinct symbolism, were always there: the throne, the dais and the canopy – coherently linked together. The throne represents the royal authority invested in the monarch and its celestial origin (Chevalier and Gheerbrandt ,2009: 961). As a symbol of royal power conferred by God upon the king, thus setting the monarch apart from his subjects, the throne is always placed on a dais, a few steps higher than the level of the room. It thus follows the Biblical tradition illustrated by King Solomon's throne (961). On a more secular note, the dais may be interpreted as a symbol of the sovereign's constitutional role as arbiter of the political life, which requires him to be above politics. Either situated at the other end of the Throne Hall, opposite the entrance, or on the lateral side of the Throne Hall, the throne, elevated on the dais (Badea-Păun, 2017: 38), is the symbolic pivot of the entire hall, commanding reverence for the authority it represents. The canopy which often overarches the throne symbolizes the celestial arch, the origin of the authority received by the monarch when crowned king (38). It is also a symbol of the divine protection which the sovereign receives when invested with royal power (Chevalier and Gheerbrandt, 2009: 123).

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The three royal symbols explained above, the throne, the dais and the canopy, markedly underline the ceremonial function of the Throne Hall in the former royal palace – a place where sovereigns were crowned, princes were baptized and deceased kings and queens lay in state. The Throne Hall, now invested with the symbol of an independent State (the closed royal crown) becomes more than just a majestic place. It becomes the center of Romanian sovereignty – the emblematic embodiment of statehood. That is why the ceremonies that could take place there were ceremonies that affirmed and reaffirmed Romanian statehood. King Mihai I was baptized there not necessarily because he was born in the royal family, but because of his position in the line of succession and his future prospects: he was the second in line to the throne, destined to reign at some point and to assume the duties and responsibilities of sovereignty. Similarly, when he lay in state in the Throne Hall in December 2017, he did so not as an ex-king (thus styled by the neo-communist power in the 1990s), but as King Mihai I of Romania – a former head of State.

Replete with the attributes of authority (the throne) and sovereignty (the crown), and with other social and cultural atributes, the Throne Hall turns from *space* into *place* (Blommaert, 2005: 222). Transfigured into a highly symbolic *place* which tells a *story*, the Throne Hall provides us with "information about ourselves" (204). Transformed into a semiotic reality through the *story*, the Throne Hall thus performs an act of identity (204).

The armorial bearings of the Romanian provinces and voivodes (at the basis of the semi-dome) reunited around the throne coherently underline the natural continuation of the Romanian *story* with the independence won in 1878 on the battlefield, the declaration of the kingdom in 1881, under King Carol I, and the union of Transylvania with Romania in 1918, under King Ferdinand I. It is the *story* of a former principality becoming a modern State. As far as narrative coherence is concerned, Barbara Johnstone clearly names its coordinates: "In order to make sense, stories have to be situated, most often explicitly, in time and space, and hearers need to know who the characters are and what they are engaged in doing" (Johnstone, 1990: 90-91). Between 1866 and 1947, the characters were familiar to the audience, as were the spatial and temporal setting of the story. This shared discourse helped build a sense of belonging, a spiritual proximity between the dynasty and the people, which was instrumental in consolidating the identity of the nation. Eighty-one years after the modern *story* started to unfold, it was abruptly brought to a halt in 1947 and changed considerably.

The Throne Hall during the Communist Regime (1948-1989)

What happened to the former royal palace and the Throne Hall after the communists forcedly dethroned King Mihai I and illegally proclaimed the

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popular republic, on 30 December 1947, mirrors what happened, on a larger scale, to the entire country. The process of de-Westernization and concurrent Easternization (whereby Romania was forced, against its traditions, to adopt the Soviet model in all its domains), which began in August 1944, when the Red Army entered into Romanian territory, was accelerated after the king's forced abdication. The most urgent measures taken by the Soviet-supported communists, illustrative of this process of de-Westernization, were both political and educational. The political measures, apart from the abdication of the king and the proclamation of the republic, included the purge of the Romanian Army and of the country's intellectual elite and the erasure of representations of the Romanian monarchy and of its kings from the people's memory. Closely linked to these political measures, and partly overlapping with them, educational actions were taken, meant to re-educate the young generations. These included the manipulation of Romanian history books and of Romanian history textbooks used in schools. The new Soviet-dependent Romanian historiography, under the command of Mihai Roller, a leading communist activist, propagandist and ideologist, removed the Romanian monarchic past and the contribution of the royal family to the progress of the country from history textbooks used in schools. According to Lucian Boia, these steps are part of the anti-national phase of the process of communization, a phase characterized by brutal and radical measures on direct orders from Moscow (Boia, 2001: 70). They were ruthlessly and promptly implemented in order to throw the population into a state of shock and disbelief which would make it impossible for the people to oppose them.

On the very night of the abdication, the statue of King Carol I, a masterpiece of the Croatian sculptor Ivan Meštrović, was destroyed by bulldozers and later melted. The Throne Hall in the royal palace would soon have a similar fate. In accordance with the decision of the Council of Ministers of 19 June 1948, the central wing of the palace, containing the former royal ceremony halls (the Royal Dining Room, the Throne Hall and the Voivodes' Stairs) started to be used for various ceremonial purposes by the State Council of the republic (Badea-Păun, 2017, 126), which was a political body performing the functions of a head of State (having replaced the Presidium of the Great National Assembly as the supreme organ of State power of the republic).

As a result of the change of regime, all the monarchic elements in the Throne Hall were either removed and scattered throughout the country, some as part of stage props for various theatres and film studios, or destroyed. As physical elements of the *story* of the Romanian constitutional monarchy, they were thus dispersed so that they could not be put back together and thus tell the *story* again. The two neo-Byzantine thrones used from the proclamation of the kingdom until 1947 were separated and sent to the Goleşti Museum of

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Viticulture and Pomiculture (Argeş County) and the National History Museum of Romania in Bucharest, respectively (38). The scarlet velvet curtain behind the thrones, embroidered with the armorial bearings of the Romanian provinces and voivodes and the coat of arms of the Hohenzollern family became part of the stage props of Buftea Film Studios. Part of it survived and has been recently returned to the royal family, who has displayed it in the Kings' Hall in Elisabeta Palace, their official residence in Bucharest (99, 129). The canopy above the throne, the four supporting pillars ending in eagle-shaped capitals, the two pillars with the winged Victories and the steps of the dais were all destroyed and removed from the room. Instead, the socialist emblem of the republic appeared on the wall where the armorial curtain once hung. The coat of arms of the Romanian kingdom, placed above the main entrance of the Throne Hall, as well as the portraits of King Carol I and King Ferdinand I placed on either side of the royal coat of arms were removed and replaced with a white empty oval-shaped medallion and simply decorated rectangles, respectively. What has survived the communist destruction were the frieze with the armorial bearings of the voivodes at the basis of the semi-dome and the fresco on the ceiling, *The Apotheosis of the Arts and Sciences*. Their survival was not unintended, as aspect that will be enlarged upon hereafter.

Once the interior of the palace changed and the old royal symbols were eliminated, the palace changed its name and its residents. It was first called *Palatul Congreselor* (The Congress Palace), and the communist party used to hold its congresses there. Once the political leadership had a new congress hall built, erected next to the former palace, its name was changed once more, into *Palatul* Republicii, i.e. The Palace of the Republic (Fototeca Online a Comunismului Românesc n.d.). The communist power was thus trying to change the identity of the former palace in the manner in which people change their identity by taking on new names.

The manner in which the communist power changed the name of the royal palace and took possession of it is illustrative of its double discourse. On the one hand, they denigrated the Romanian kings in history books and textbooks used in schools, depicting the sovereigns and the royal family as representatives of the exploiting class. On the other hand, they took possession of the former royal residences. Some of them would house important political institutions of the communist State, such as the State Council. Other former royal residences (most of them properties of the Crown Estates) would be turned into holiday houses for the newly emerged party nomenclature.

However, the former Throne Hall and Royal Dining Room would continue to be used as ceremony areas for State occasions such as receptions of foreign guests, important meetings of the members of the Romanian

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Communist Party, investiture ceremonies (Fototeca Online a Comunismului Românesc n.d.). For example, in April 1966, a meeting between Josip Broz Tito, the President of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and Nicolae Ceaușescu, Secretary General of the Romanian Communist Party, took place in the former Throne Hall.



Figure 2. The former Throne Hall. The signing ceremony of the common declaration regarding the visit to Romania of Josip Broz Tito, the President of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. One can see the emblem of the socialist republic in the place where once the canopy overarched the throne, and the two surviving ceiling decorations (the frieze with armorial bearings and the fresco).
Source: Fototeca Online a Comunismului Românesc (The Online Photo Collection of the Romanian Communism) Pressmark: 21/1966

Then, in July of the same year, the meeting of the Political Advisory Committee of the states participating in the Warsaw Treaty was also held there. The official breakfast in honor of the guests was held on 4 July 1966 in the former Royal Dining Room (thus complying with the initial function of the room). However, ten years later, in 1976, another official breakfast for the Political Advisory Committee of the states participating in the Warsaw Treaty was no longer held in the former Royal Dining Room, but in the former Throne Hall, which is surprising given the existence and the previous use of the former Royal Dining Room for such occasions.

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Figure 3. The meeting of the Council of the Political Consultative Committee of the states participating in the Warsaw Treaty. The official breakfast held in the former Royal Hall, 25-26 November 1976. Notice that King Ferdinand I's portrait, formerly hanging on the wall on the left side of the photo, was removed.
Source: Fototeca Online a Comunismului Românesc (The Online Photo Collection of the Romanian Communism) Pressmark: 332/1976

These details are worth mentioning because they not only explain what happened to a symbolic Romanian building, part of our built heritage, but, on a deeper level, they help us understand what happened to the country and its people during the communist regime. The disappearance and destruction of royal furniture and decorations that once embellished the Throne Hall are not tragic because they involved royal objects *per se*; they are tragic because they imply the falsification and loss of a *story* – the story of how modern Romania came of age.

As stated above, stories need to contain all the necessary data that make them coherent accounts of events. Narrative coherence is thus achieved by providing "detail about place, time, character, and activity" which "serves as orientation in stories" (Johnstone 1990: 91). Drawing on Wallace Chafe, who tackles the structure of stories from a cognitive perspective, and on his concepts of "need for background" and "orientation" (Chafe, 1980: 41-42), Barbara Johnstone advocates the fact that background information – "information about location in space and time, about the social context, and about background activity" – is indispensable for "'the self' so as not to feel disoriented or uncomfortable" (Johnstone 1990: 91). Hence, these background details (or "background orientation") help people position themselves in a given context in the same manner in which "people regaining

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consciousness typically ask where they are, what time it is, and what is going on" (91). In order to manipulate the population and infuse people's consciousness with Soviet ideology, communist ideologists and propagandists distorted the *story* of the Throne Hall by deleting details that could serve as background orientation: they altered the spatial setting of the narrative (by destroying and/or removing artifacts – the thrones, the canopy, the curtain, the dais, the royal coat of arms). They also deleted the main characters in the story (by replacing the portraits of King Carol I and King Ferdinand I in the Throne Hall with blank or trivially decorated panels). Therefore, the original *story*, linked to landmark events in the country's history, was lost and replaced with a forged one in which the main roles were attributed not to individualized characters, but to a different type of character, a collective character – the people, the leading character in the ideologically infused Soviet historiography of the Romanian past. The Throne Hall and its narrative were vanishing. Concurrently, history textbooks were being rewritten to serve the new ideology.

The old story was replaced with a new story, a fake story, but one carefully penned in order to make sense and be believed. Like language, symbols too can be invested ideologically, frequently with a manipulative aim. Ideological infusion can prove extremely effective when it acquires "the status of common sense" (Fairclough, 1992: 87). The fact that the frieze with the armorial bearings of the Romanian voivodes, situated at the base of the semi-dome that once overhung the entire structure of the throne, was not destroyed is not accidental. It can be considered a manifestation of a patriotic discourse developed in the 1960s whereby the communist power legitimized itself through "direct recourse to predecessors" (Bochmann, 2010: 123). By saving these symbols, the communist leaders presented themselves as the legitimate successors of a long line of brave voivodes, part of the Romanians' shared narrative. Thus, the communists wormed their way *into* the *story* and appropriated part of it in a manner that seemed logical, hence difficult to reject (see Figure 2). They provided the newly brainwashed generations of Romanians with a different background orientation which made the young adopt ideological positions without being aware that they had been manipulated because the *story* made sense.

The Throne Hall after 1990: Consumerism at Its Worst

During the events of December 1989, which led to the fall of the communist regime, the former royal palace was severely damaged by fire and projectiles. After 1990, the entire building came to house the National Museum of Art of Romania and was therefore subjected to extensive restoration and redevelopment. In 2009, the central wing (including the former Royal Dining Room, the Throne Hall and the Voivodes' Stairs) were

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completely renovated and restored almost entirely to their original form (Muzeul Naţional de Artă al României, n.d.). The portraits of the first two constitutional monarchs were returned to their original places in the Throne Hall and so were the coat of arms of the Romanian kingdom and the dais of the throne. However, the two neo-Byzantine thrones, the canopy and the pillars that supported it and flanked the thrones were not. Their place has been taken by an almost larger than life photograph of the ensemble, a genuine, yet painful reminder of an almost forgotten dignity.

Since the reopening of the whole museum to the public, the former royal palace, like many other museums, has been struggling to survive in an age of ruthless capitalism. Consequently, several measures have been taken in order to turn it into a profitable institution. One of these actions was renting out certain areas of the museum, including the royal areas, for various cultural purposes. According to point 12 of the Annex to the Order no. 2172 of 25 March 2013 of the Minister of Culture regarding the approval of tariffs for the services provided by the National Museum of Art of Romania, the Throne Hall can be rented for forty-five thousand lei per day for the organization of cultural events. Therefore, access is allowed to anyone who can afford spending almost a thousand Euros a day, on condition that the organized event be of a cultural nature.

The royal family of Romania is, probably, the only private entity that rents the Throne Hall for the organization of two types of events which harmonize with the initial state-related purpose of the Throne Hall: the annual meeting of the diplomatic corps in Bucharest and royal investments. One should not forget two other State occasions for which the Throne Hall was the obvious setting: Queen Ana's lying-in-state ceremony in August 2016 and King Mihai I's lying-in-state in December 2017.

Other renters have a more comprehensive understanding of the concept of "cultural events". In 2005, one of the shareholders of a Bucharest football club organized his wedding in the Throne Hall (Dragoş Săvulescu, 2010). In 2008, the Throne Hall was the launch event venue for a luxury brand of whisky (Sala Tronului din Palatul Regal 2008) and for an exclusive phone produced by a British cell phone company (Vertu, 2008). Photographs from the mobile phone launch party show the Throne Hall transformed into a stage. The list of similar events may continue with other product launch events, corporate events and even fashion shows (Maria Marinescu, 2008).

Although there are other ample and elegant spaces to rent in the former Royal Palace according to the Order no. 2172 of 25 March 2013 of the Minister of Culture (e.g. the former Royal Dining Room, The Hall of Mirrors or the Auditorium Hall), the Throne Hall seems to be at the top of the list of preferences. The consumers' choice for this specific room can be circumscribed to a particular consumerist behavior.

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In the analysis of present-day consumer society, Jean Baudrillard underlines that consumption is no longer understood in terms of use-value and exchange-value of products. Consumption has developed a new dimension which leads to its use as language (Baudrillard, 1998: 61). Just like language, consumption has turned into a means of communication. It has also turned into "a process of classification and social differentiation" (Baudrillard, 1998: 61) within which the use-value of a commodity is replaced by its sign-value. Therefore, commodities are no longer consumed for their use-value (for their capacity to satisfy a need), but for the social prestige that they lend to their owners. Thus, commodities have turned into status symbols (61-62).

Subject to the generalized commodification ethos that pervades Romanian society, the Throne Hall and other similar areas in the former royal palace have turned into mere objects. The museum no longer rents out rooms, because their use-value has become irrelevant. It rents out status symbols, the sign-value of which is in high demand in today's competitive world where "image" reigns supreme. Little or only partially aware of the *story* of the Throne Hall, renters who transform this place into a stage regard it as an incomplete mosaic which they cannot make sense of. Unacquainted with all the background information of the *story*, they lack the orientation which would help them understand where they are in historical terms.

In December 2018, just a few weeks before Romania took on the presidency of the EU Council, the Romanian government hosted a working lunch in the Throne Hall for a delegation from the European Parliament. In the Hall of Honor, which provides access to the Throne Hall, the government organized an exhibition of local food and fruit. Tables neatly arranged among classical marble columns were filled with fruits, nuts, various sorts of bread, sponge cakes, cheeses, smoked foods, sausages, jars with jams and other local produce. It all looked like a copious field party held in the wrong place. On 20 January 2019, the Throne Hall was used again as a dining room on the occasion of the meeting of the COSAC[3] chairpersons.

It is difficult to believe that the Romanian Prime Minister was unaware of the symbolism of the Throne Hall and of the fact that just below it there is the former Royal Dining Room, built especially for State banquets and official lunches and dinners. Naturally, any host is keen to impress their guests and make them feel special. The decision of the Romanian government was viewed as an exaggeration which, for some, was baffling. It was also a political *faux pas* in terms of the image of the party in power, the Social Democrat Party, the continuator of the National Salvation Front (after

[3] COSAC (or Conferința Organizațiilor Specializate în Afaceri Comunitare și Europene) is the Romanian acronym for the Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs.

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the fall of the communist regime, one of the first political parties whose members included numerous former members of the communist party nomenclature). One could easily draw a parallel between the decision of the present-day Romanian government to use the former Throne Hall as a venue for a working lunch and the decision of the Romanian Communist Party to host an official breakfast in the same Throne Hall in 1976 for the representatives of the Warsaw Treaty member states who convened in Bucharest (see Figure 3).

However, the logic of consumerism may provide an explanation. Baudrillard maintains that "the consumption of a surplus", a feature of societies since time immemorial, makes people "feel not merely that they exist, but that they are alive" (43). This "superfluity" irresistibly excites the senses and makes the individual crave for more. Severely criticized for being a political puppet, the Prime Minister was eager to show that she was what she aspired to be: a true leader. Choosing the Throne Hall for its value as a status symbol, the Prime Minister wanted to set herself apart, to individualize herself and to do more than simply be the Prime Minister, but to feel alive *as* Prime Minister as well. The exercise of power, and the perks that come with it, can (apparently) make one feel alive.

In spite of the full-size photograph of the throne and the crowned canopy, reminiscences of the real *story* of the Throne Hall and perpetual symbols of Romania's sovereignty, its presence in the Throne Hall today is not fully understood. As stated before, these symbols are part of the background information of the *story* and help provide orientation to those who enter the hall. They also perform an act of identity – making Romanians aware of who they are as a nation. This is the reason for the existence of the photograph: to provide orientation to those who want to discover and understand what the Throne Hall really stands for. However, years of communist and post-communist manipulation and indoctrination have taken their toll. Unable to understand the intrinsic symbolism of the Throne Hall, numerous people will continue to consider it anachronistic, hence, useless, or, at best, a beautiful decorative background for an official lunch.

Conclusions

The government's decision to use the Throne Hall as a venue for a working lunch when there were numerous other viable alternatives received massive criticism both in the central press and on social media. This may be explained by a rising awareness of the general public regarding various national symbols, the Throne Hall in particular. The passing away of Queen Ana and King Mihai I and their lying-in-state ceremonies, broadcast live, became media events which connected people not only with the two monarchs, but also with each other. The two royal funerals revived the

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people's interest in the Throne Hall and the former royal palace, since these events showed people a coherent use of such places, in a setting that makes sense. The Throne Hall, even if only temporarily restored to its initial State function by the two sad events, continued to perform an act of identity, strengthening the audience's sense of who they are as a nation and adding new chapters to its *story* – a *story* that helps map their identity and that is worth discovering.

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Fototeca Online a Comunismului Românesc. (n.d.). Figura 2. Aspect de la semnarea Comunicatului comun cu privire la vizita oficială în ţara noastră a preşedintelui Republicii Socialiste Federative Iugoslavia – Iosip Broz Tito. Bucureşti, 23 aprilie 1966. Cota: 21/1966/ Figure 2. A Snapshot from the Signing of the Mutual Communiqué Regarding the Official Visit in Our Country of the President of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia – Josip Broz Tito, Bucharest, April 23, 1966. Pressmark: 21/1966. Retrieved July 27, 2019, from https://fototeca.iiccr.ro/picdetails.php?picid=30792X31X5687

Fototeca Online a Comunismului Românesc. (n.d.). Figura 3. Consfătuirea de la Bucureşti a Comitetului Politic Consultativ al ţărilor participante la Tratatul de la Varşovia. În timpul dejunului oficial. (25-26 noiembrie 1976). Cota: 332/1976/ Figure 3. The Meeting of the Council of the Political Consultative Committee of the States Participating in the Warsaw Treaty. The official breakfast held in the former Royal Hall, 25-26 November 1976. Pressmark: 332/1979. Retrieved July 27, 2019, from https://fototeca.iiccr.ro/picdetails.php?picid=41492X811X1289

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